Selected Psalms Translated By Mary Sidney
Commentary By Tom Dlugosch

The reputation of Mary Sidney, Lady Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), has risen in recent decades, to the point that she is now included in the list of possible authors or co-authors of the plays attributed to William Shakespeare.[1] However, Mary Sidney has few acknowledged works, some in hand-written documents only, some possibly lost to fires in her two main residences in the 17th century. Several works nevertheless can be confidently attributed to her, primary among them her metrical paraphrases of psalms, a substantial body of work. Beginning at the age of 28, Mary Sidney translated 107 psalms to complete the project begun by her brother, celebrated sonneteer Sir Philip Sidney, who died in battle in 1586, fighting against Spain in the Netherlands for the Protestant cause. Mary Sidney Herbert not only had lost her parents that same year, but also a daughter two years earlier. She converted her grief into the intense labour of fashioning original versions of Psalms 43-150, using 126 different verse forms[2] (Psalm 119 has 22 sections, each in a different form.) It is a sort of poetic sampler that provided her with the opportunity to learn the poetics that had not been part of her early education. She completed the project sometime in the late 1580's, extending perhaps into the early 1590's, circulating hand-written copies within the literary circle she and her brother had led. Although the psalms were not printed during her lifetime, in 1599 she presented a copy of the completed psalms to Queen Elizabeth. I am curious to identify her poetic signature in these psalms.

First, a preliminary observation: her psalms reflect a religious devotion that we do not see in the plays. That difference makes sense in context. First of all, the original psalms express belief. Moreover, it was prudent in the 16th century both to avow belief as a personal choice, and also to avoid issues of belief in public theatres, which were subject to wholesale shutdown. Religion was not a safe topic for dramatic presentation in contentious times. Members of Mary Sidney's family were on the cusp of change in that era, standing firmly in the Protestant mainstream, with a few toes in Catholic waters. They certainly had to be adept at knowing when and how to address religious issues. As a devout agnostic myself, I do not see a problem with a writer expressing devotion at one point and disinterest on other occasions.

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[1] Williams, Robin P. *Sweet Swan of Avon: Did a Woman Write Shakespeare?* Santa Fe, NM: Wilton Circle, 2012. Print.
Faulkes, Fred. *Tiger's Heart in Woman's Hide*. Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2007. Print.

[2] Pembroke, Mary Sidney Herbert Of., and Margaret P. Hannay et al. *Selected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*. P.16. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005. Print.

Below are selections from four of her translations: firstly Psalm 72, on the notion of kingship; secondly Psalm 95, on the relationship between creator and creatures; and thirdly Psalms 102 and 112, on obedience to the law and the nature of sin.

Sidney used the 1560 Geneva Bible in English as her basis but she was also capable of consulting versions in other languages. The selections below use the Geneva version revised in 1599 as a point of comparison. The Geneva version and its close relative the APBA used in Anglican services work well for congregational recitation and for hymns; but for conceptual force and poetic invention, Sidney has much to offer. In general, Sidney has an early modern, humanistic perspective, and she dramatizes religious situations.

Psalm 72

Royalty was not a distant thing for Mary Sidney, whose family was one of the wealthiest and most highly placed in England in the 16th century. She was selected as a "maid of honor" to Queen Elizabeth (and perhaps coined that phrase), and her sons were royal favorites of King James. It is appropriate to her station that her version of Psalm 72 can provide a knowing meditation on what it means to be a king. Whereas the Geneva version lends itself easily to the notion of the divine right of kings, Sidney puts more emphasis on human considerations. The wisdom of her version continues to have great relevance today to our own hopes for good leadership.

The opening lines of the Geneva version of Psalm 72 speak in general terms of the royal obligation to judge righteously:

> *1 Give thy judgments to the King, O God, and thy righteousness to the King's son. 2 Then shall he judge thy people in righteousness, and thy poor with equity.*

Mary Sidney presents justice in more dynamic, interactive terms.

> *1 Teach the king's son, who king himself shall be, / thy judgments lord, thy justice make him learn:*
> *2 To rule thy Realm as justice shall decree, / And poor men's right in judgment to discern.* (spelling corrected)

I like the emphasis Sidney gives to the inexperience of the royal heir, who is in the stage of learning what he needs to become: kingship isn't inherent in his position alone, but must be acquired. Sidney's version conveys a Platonic sense of the ideals of justice and righteousness. She says the new king's task is to *discern* the right belonging to all people of the standards of justice, which stem from a divine source. There is a forcefulness behind God's role in Sidney's version: the strong words *Teach*

and *make* replace the supplicant's words *Give* and *shall*. Properly, justice and righteousness are not merely favours disbursed by a leader, but imposed ideals. Perhaps the crises of leadership are the foundry of leadership, trying a leader in the heat of flood, external threat, or the necessities of government.

The word *Make* figures even more prominently in Sidney's rendition of the next lines.

Sidney*:*

> *3 Then fearless peace, with rich increase the mountains proud shall fill: and justice shall make plenty fall on ev'ry humble hill.*
> *4 Make him the weak support, th'opprest relieve, supply the poor, the quarrell-pickers quail: so ageless ages shall thee reverence give.*

Geneva:

> *3 The mountains and the hills shall bring peace to the people by justice.*
> *4 He shall judge the poor of the people: he shall save the children of the needy, and shall subdue the oppressor.*

Sidney reminds us, in her striking description of the *fearlessness* that follows the peace deriving from justice, that peace is more than something deposited upon or given to the world; it is the fulfillment of our highest hopes, the crowning glory atop "the mountains proud." Would that our leaders today, or any day, would see peace as the exultant achievement of hard-won fearlessness, rather than as a board game of preventative measures fencing our fears without allaying them!

Notice also the significant subjects of the verbs. Geneva allows the king to be the actor as the verbs' subject, whereas the Sidney lines say God *makes* the king *support* the weak: should it be the king who brings justice, or God who *makes* the king aware of the ideal of justice? I would side with Sidney. Justice isn't a gift from the king; it is measured by its nearness to the ideal.

The most delicious part by far of Sidney's translation is her description in line 4 of oppressors as those who are *quarrel-pickers* (Sidney); and her assertion that the way to subvert them is not to try to *subdue* them (Geneva) but to make them *quail* (Sidney), in other words, to make them cower and seek the shadows. Again, would that our leaders could understand that oppressors belong in the shadows, not the limelight. The alliteration here is the sort of cheap trick of which Shakespeare has over the centuries often been accused, but I like it, in that it punctuates a point.

Later in the psalm, Geneva enlists the imagery of nature to good effect:

16. An handful of corn shall be sown in the earth, even in the top of the mountains, and the fruit thereof shall shake like the trees of Lebanon: and the children shall flourish out of the city like the grass of the earth.
17. His name shall be forever: his name shall endure as long as the sun: all nations shall bless him, and be blessed in him.

But in Mary Sidney's rich expansion of lines 16-17, you see a full evocation of how a just king's ethos infuses his kingdom.

16. Look how the woods, where interlaced trees
Spread friendly arms each other to embrace,
Join at the head, though distant at the knees,
Waving with wind, and lording on the place:
So woods of corn by mountains borne
Shall on their shoulders wave: and men shall pass
The numbrous grass, such store each town shall have.

17. Look how the Sun, so shall his name remain;
As that in light, so this in glory one:
All glories that, at this all lights shall stain:
Nor that shall fail, nor this be overthrown.
The dwellers all of earthly ball in him shall hold them blest:
As one that is of perfect bliss a pattern to the rest.

I'd like to live in that kingdom. The king becomes the sun in line 17, and ideally his legacy might shine on for ages, and he can be regarded as a model for us all. Optimist that I am, I have to think that that is what every new head of state aspires to be, a generator of prosperity for the eternal city shining on the hilltop. Mary Sidney helps us see and articulate the nature of leadership. Her translations stay true to the original but add much value. She wrote within a decade of the end of Elizabeth's reign when the absence of an heir was felt very strongly, and when James was about to ascend the throne. Good leadership was and still is an essential of life. We continue to hope for leaders who keep quarrel-pickers in their place in the shadows.

Psalm 95

In Psalm 95 Sidney emphasizes the emotional purposes of praising the Lord, in contrast to Geneva's emphasis on the external actions of praise. For instance, Sidney adds the verbs "record and raise" to the Geneva version of verse 1, to indicate the collective purpose behind the praise, the shared sense of security of being able to rely upon the care of the Lord as the community's Rock. For her, the rock evokes the primitive emotion of safety, rather than the elevated notion of salvation. Sidney stays closer to the human level.

Geneva*:*

> *Come, let us rejoice unto the Lord; let us sing aloud unto the rock of our salvation.*

Sidney*:*

> *Come, come let us with joyful voice record and raise Jehovah's praise: Come let us in our safety's Rock rejoice.*

In verse 2, Sidney employs the Old English meaning of the word *gladness*, with its original meaning of radiant with joy, a more internal description of worshippers' emotions than Geneva's "sing aloud" (which in 1560 was translated as "shout").

Sidney*:*

> *Into his presence let us go And there with psalms our gladness show.*

Geneva*:*

> *Let us come before his face with praise: let us sing aloud unto him with psalms.*

Then later, in verses 6-7, Sidney depicts the emotional elements of awestruck worship using the words fall and awful grace and the image of God's face. Geneva more simply depicts the act of worship (including the word "fall" which was added in 1599 to the 1560 version).

Geneva awkwardly refers to the "people of his pasture." Sidney shifts the focus from the vehicle of that metaphor to the tenor by adding to it three dynamic verbs demonstrating the divine acts of keeping and leading and feeding.

Geneva*:*

> *6-7 Come, let us worship and fall down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.*

Sidney*:*

> *6-7 Come let us fall, let us adore: Come let us kneel with awful grace Before the Lord, the Lord our maker's face. He is our God, he doth us keep:*
> *We by him led, And by him fed, His people are, we are his pasture sheep.*

Sidney in these lines conveys awe as an internally generated emotion, whereas Geneva keeps the emphasis on the external power commanding worship.

[At the next point in Psalm 95, in verses 8-9, the focus changes direction radically, speaking in God's angry voice. Geneva and Sidney are nearly identical in these two lines, where Geneva says "Harden not your heart…as your fathers tempted me, proved me, though they had seen my works" referring to the wanderings in the wilderness.]

In this ending section of the psalm presenting God's retributive voice, the Geneva version portrays a God so harsh that his *wrath* might invite sympathy for those souls forever denied God's *rest*. Sidney does not soften the judgment, but she places the focus on the righteous decisiveness of God's wrath, putting the blame squarely on Israel's repeated rejection of God because it "did tempt and try and vex, and grieve me still." Geneva says they did not know God's ways; Sidney says they were not just naively ignorant; they were wilfully foolish.

Geneva*:*

> *Forty years I have contended with this generation, and said, They are a people that err in heart, for they have not known my ways. Wherefore I swore in my wrath, saying, surely they shall not enter into my rest."*

Sidney*:*

> *Twice twenty times my post, the sun,*
> *His yearly race to end had run,*
> *While this fond Nation, bent to ill,*
> *Did tempt, and try, and vex, and grieve me still.*
> *Which when I saw, thus said I, lo,*
> *These men are mad, And too too bad*
> *Err in their hearts; my ways they will not know.*
> *Thus, therefore, unto them I swear:*
> *(I angry can no more forbear)*
> *The rest for you I did ordain,*
> *I will so work you never shall obtain.*

It's quite a passage, grand despite its tetrameter. Her use of repetition and periodic syntax makes key points emphatic. Sidney's rhymes avoid seeming strained, and the one line where she substitutes internal rhyme shows authorial confidence. She ends with the judicial language of *ordain* and *obtain*. This moment of dramatic monologue demonstrates her command over voice and character. I can imagine this resonant voice employed on stage.

Psalm 112: reflections upon the Lord as Ruler and Judge

In Psalm 112 verse 2 Mary Sidney reflects an interactive, shared understanding of the foundations of moral law: "That in the things the Lord commandeth [our] most delight appeareth." In other words, doing good feels good. The Geneva version reflects a more subservient attitude,

wholly dependent upon authority: "Blessed is the man, that feareth the Lord, and delighteth greatly in his commandments." For Geneva, fear seems to precede delight and leads to blessed compliance, whereas for Sidney, delight in the law generates obedience. Sidney's version preserves the idea that the behavior itself leads to delight. It is possible to take delight not in the rules themselves but in one's active choices in the following of the principles behind the commandments. Her poetry presents obedience in the context of multiple decisions and multiple delights.

The same point about the emotional base of law is made in both Sidney and Geneva in another passage near the end of Psalm 112, where envy is pictured vividly as a torment inflicted upon those who do not obey the commandments and therefore do not prosper. The Geneva version reads: "The wicked shall see [the righteous man's power and prosperity] and be angry: he shall gnash with his teeth, and consume away: the desire of the wicked shall perish." Sidney adds rhyme and alliteration to her version: "Wicked wretches shall seeing fume, and fuming consume to nought, their fruitless fetches, to nought with them consuming."

Sidney's version takes delight in the words themselves, especially the rhyme of *wicked wretches* with *fruitless fetches*, and the chiasmic doubling of *nought* and *consume*. She knows how to make the most of an opportunity to depict the human hell of self-inflicted pain beyond gnashing of teeth to the very self-destructiveness of evil. Playful phrasing is a constant in Sidney, along with skill in traditional poetic devices, but again, the devices serve to emphasize a point.

Psalm 130

The topic of sin went somewhat out of fashion for my generation, the Age of Aquarius. We dismissed a lot of what went for sin in our elders' generation. But the universal sense of personal failing is hard to expunge. Both Geneva and Sidney remind us that the experience of this world sets our sense of personal transcendence to the test. If we ought to be unhappy about anything, it is our own shortcomings. However, as powerful as the first lines of Geneva are, they somewhat blunt the point. Sidney bites deeper.

Geneva:

> *Out of the deep places have I called unto thee, O Lord*
> *Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears attend to the voice of my prayers*
> *If thou, O Lord, straightly markest iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?*
> *But mercy is with thee, that thou mayest be feared.*

Sidney:

> *From depth of grief where drown'd I lie, Lord for relief to thee I cry:*

My earnest, vehement, crying, praying, Grant quick, attentive, hearing, weighing.
O Lord, if thou offences mark, Who shall not bow to bear the cark [burden]?
But with thy justice mercy dwelleth, Whereby thy worship more excelleth.

Verse 1 of the Geneva version has an unmatchable power in its direct appeal to God for relief. The dactylic rhythm is part of what makes it so strong, and the repetition of *Lord* helps to evoke an interpersonal moment of appeal. It is painfully, breathtakingly beautiful. The depths refer to "the engulfing waters of Sheol into which the dead sink"[3] as Sidney also makes clear in her version with the reference to drowning.

But verse 2 of the Geneva version seems awkward, addressing God the way you'd remonstrate with a child. Mary Sydney clarifies this relationship. She utilises a trochaic rhythm in a forceful string of adjectives combined with dramatic pairs of gerunds: crying, praying, hearing, weighing. It is very clear here who *bows* as the abject supplicant and who forgives with cleansing power. This agonised grief is an intimate appeal to a God who is as close as a parent, whom we expect to respond to our need. It too is achingly beautiful.

In other words, as powerful as the entire Geneva translation is, it might not hit the mark of due respect for the main point, our lapses into behaviour that could be considered sinful. One might read the Geneva version with no more than a faint sense of personal failing. In that regard, if not in poetic beauty and force, Sidney perhaps has an edge. For instance, in line 6 (not fully quoted here) Geneva refers to "what we do wrong" whereas Sidney sees a face "sore with blot of sin defaced." Geneva seems vague, whereas Sidney portrays both shame and agony vividly. Once again, we see her powers of dramatization. Sidney helps us see the main sense of this psalm, that falling short of our highest standards, those of the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings, is the greatest depth of agony.

The final section is addressed to Israel, enjoining it to redeem itself by changing its ways. Sidney makes it clear that the lesson should not be limited in its application to Israel; instead, she opens up the discourse to allow it to be extended to all of us in a more universal sense.

Geneva:

Let Israel wait on the Lord: for with the Lord is mercy, and with him is great redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

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[3] Buttrick, George Arthur, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible,* vol 4 p. 678. New York: Abingdon Press, 1955, 6781982. Print.

Sidney:

> *Then Israel on God attend: / Attend him well, who still thy friend,*
> *In kindness hath thee dear esteemed, / And often, often, erst redeemed.*
> *Now, as before; unchanged he / Will thee restore, thy state will free;*
> *All wickedness from Jacob driving, / Forgetting follies, faults forgiving.*

I like how Sidney expands the final section, speaking of Israel in an archetypal sense that includes us now. The original audience would have seen it that way, as something for everyone hearing the psalm, and for Sidney that would have been all of her Christian audience, timelessly in its fallen state. Sidney personifies the relationship with God vividly in those final words, especially in the very intimate terms of *friend*, *kindness*, and *dear*. It reminds me of the distinction Martin Buber makes, between I – Thou and I – It. Geneva presents Israel in the third person, keeping it at a distance as an It, guilty of its (*his*) sins. For Sidney, Israel is us; she speaks of Israel in the second person, and uses *still* and *often* to convey an ahistorical and universal sense of follies and faults in perpetual need of forgiveness.

In conclusion, it seems to me that Sidney's translations add expressive touches to the psalms, and she expands their purview to capture vivid details of human experience. More scholarship needs to be done on this remarkable writer. One writer initiating this work is Gerald Hammond, co-editor of the Norton Critical edition of the King James Bible, who says in his lecture *Mary Sidney's Psalms and the Uses of History* that Mary Sidney…

> "seldom departs far from her original text but she constantly experiments with form and structure so much so that it may not be too fanciful to claim that in her versification of Psalms 44-150 we find the first fully developed realisation of the possibilities of the English lyric poem…. While there were dozens of attempts to paraphrase or translate the psalms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries only Mary Sidney's version found a range of lyric forms capable of appropriating into English the range of experience which the psalms covered. In doing this her work became a major influence upon the lyric poetry of the next two generations."[4]

"Mary Sidney's Psalms and the Uses of History". Lecture. Gerald Hammond University of Manchester. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/1977001.pdf

Another is Margaret Hannay, who observes that we see Sidney's skills in her expansions of the metaphors in the originals, to…

> "vividly capture an experience, such as the storm where the waves feel so high 'the stars do drop bedashed with rain' and the ship touches the sky, only to fall abruptly to the center of the earth. Those on board stagger like drunkards (107.65-80). Such expansions frequently reflect her own experience: as a bride in an arranged marriage in Psalm 45; as a participant at Elizabeth's court in the opening of 104; as a woman who has experienced pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, and child-rearing (as in 48.17-18; 51.15-18; 131; and 139.43-63); and as a writer (as in 68, 75, and 119)"[5]

The Psalms fit into a very productive period of Sidney's career. By 1590, she had translated Robert Garnier's play *Antonius* from French into English, and composed a pastoral dialogue between two shepherds. Then the record has gaps, not surprising given the fires that destroyed her residences, and in an era between the custom of privately circulated literary manuscripts and the emergence of printed publications. By 1600, she had translated Petrarch's *The Triumph of Death* from the Italian, the first English translation in terza rima. After working feverishly for three years following the deaths of her parents, daughter, and brother, are we to believe that she wrote so little until her death on Sep 25, 1623? Hardly likely. Perhaps she found it necessary to continue without recognition, not the first time a woman's voice remained in the closet. A gaping hole of a mystery at least 23 years deep has yawned before us for 400 years. Certainly, the Psalms and other early works deserve due consideration, so that we can assess her merits. While her translation of Psalms may not in itself constitute a work of eternal greatness, it is perhaps the earliest work of a great writer, showing a forceful mind and a wide array of estimable skills.

[5] Pembroke, Mary Sidney Herbert Of., and Margaret P. Hannay et al. *Selected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*. P.185. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005. Print.